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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 000233

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTION SERIES #14: SLOGANS AND A
SPECIAL SESSION OF CONGRESS

REF: SANTO DOMINGO 00147

11. (SBU) Following is no. 14 in our series on the Dominican presidential elections:

SLOGANS AND A SPECIAL SESSION OF CONGRESS

The controversy over a proposed election law change (reftel) is heading for a climax. On January 10 President Mejia announced that he would extend the current special session of the legislature and officially notified the President of the Senate. The additional special session got underway this afternoon (September 12). President Mejia said the extension was requested not solely to consider the ruling PRD-friendly "Law of Slogans" election measure, but also to approve "seven or eight very important bills that are in Congress, such as the Law on Systemic Risk in the Banking Sector."

January 12 press reports indicate that after a scrub of the draft proposal, representatives of four PRD candidates have canvassed the Congress and believe they have enough support to pass a revised "Law of Slogans" bill. Ruling PRD leader Tirso Mejia Ricart now claims intellectual authorship, rather than little known and often absent legislator Henry Saraff. The PRD is counting on its own congressional votes, plus four or five from the opposition Social Christian Reform Party (PRSC). (As one columnist dryly noted, "There's always the man in the corridor with a few thousand pesos in his attache case.") As reported reftel, if the bill does become law, it will be challenged, probably in the Supreme Court and the Disputes Chamber of the Central Electoral Board (JCE). Press accounts indicate that the most recent version of the bill would allow prospective candidates to register directly with the JCE, as an alternative to registering with party organizations, and thus circumvent obstacles posed by party splits. To comply with the letter of the Constitution that requires a direct vote for president, the draft law is likely to stipulate that the winner obtain a majority of all votes cast -- as does the current electoral law.

THIRD PLACE AND CRUMBLING

The executive committee of the opposition PRSC met January 10 for three hours and issued a weakly supported resolution against the "Ley de Lemas" proposal. Running a distant third in the Presidential campaign, the PRSC remains plagued by uncertain and divided leadership. Presidential candidate Eduardo Estrella chaired, but only 32 of the 50 members of the executive committee attended; of those, only 19 signed the resolution directing PRSC members of Congress to vote against the bill. Of the 35 PRSC congressional representatives, just 14 were present.

The PRSC division and dilemma overweighed the bold text of the resolution, since only 38 percent of the executive committee signed and less than half of the PRSC congressional representatives were present.

Estrella is unhappy with the PRD electoral maneuver, since if it is carried through, it could shift emphasis in the first round from individual candidates to parties. The PRSC had already planned to hold a national congress this month. Assuming that Estrella's rival Jacinto Peynado (or a stand-in) chooses to run, the PRSC first-round vote is likely to be larger than would otherwise be the case, and therefore the PRSC might constitute a more convincing swing factor. The PRSC "third wave" could be Federico ("Quique") Antun Batlle, distant from both of them, who told journalists that because of "mean-spirited, out-of-phase opponents" within the party he felt pushed to convene his followers and the mid-level leadership of the party to formalize his own campaign, known by its "slogan" QAP (Quique Antun Presidente).
MEANWHILE, AT THE FRONT OF THE PACK

As for front-runner Leonel Fernandez, he bought prime time on television stations and radio on Sunday night to attack the

PRD initiative as an irresponsible attempt to "abort" the May election "with force and payoffs." He asserted that polls show him with 63 percent of the vote, "43 points more than all the PRD pre-candidates combined." Fernandez quoted Mejia's comment in a television interview last week -- "Political power is there to be used" -- and hammered away at it. Power is not to be used to intimidate the Chamber of Deputies into accepting a new president; power is not to be used to set up a sham Electoral Board; power is not to be used to show disrespect for civil society, the church, private business, etc., etc., etc. . . After months of trips abroad for colloquia and trips to the regions for party conclaves, Leonel was angry, passionate, eloquent, and very much back on the national scene.

12. (U) Drafted by Angela Kerwin, Michael Meigs.
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